

From the Desk of ...



Congressman Dan Lungren
California

Dear Citizen:

After spending three weeks in the District Office holding Town Hall meetings and attending official events I, along with fifteen other Members of Congress, had the opportunity to travel to Israel on a fact finding mission. This followed a similar trip made up of Democrat members of the House. Prior to agreeing to the trip, we submitted information about the trip and its sponsors to the House Ethics Committee for pre-approval by its staff. After receiving this approval, we embarked on our trip.

I thought it important to take the opportunity to visit this important and volatile area of the world, especially in view of the fact that it occurred during the disengagement of Israel from the Gaza Strip. During the course of our time there, we were able to view a boundary point of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the Negrev Desert which is the southern most portion of the internationally recognized land of Israel. It is startling to be reminded that at one point the State of Israel is only nine miles wide. Equally startling is the distance of Jerusalem to Tel Aviv - no more than 35 miles.

From a military standpoint, the importance of some areas such as the Golan Heights is immediately apparent when you view it on the ground. This land has proven to be militarily significant in the numerous wars that have occurred there over the last forty years.

Highlights of our visit included the opportunity to have extended meetings with the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, former Prime Minister Netanyahu, current Deputy Prime Minister and former Mayor of Jerusalem Olmert, and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. While all of the aforementioned Israeli political leaders had strong views about Israel's unilateral disengagement policy - with Netanyahu publicly opposing Sharon and leaving his government just weeks before we arrived - I was impressed by the rich tradition of democracy they all shared, the compelling commitment to the continued existence of the State of Israel as well as the willingness to take risks on behalf of achieving peace with their Arab neighbors. These are men of intelligence, quality, depth, and leadership. Indeed, an impressive group.

I viewed the meeting with Abbas with just as much interest since he represents a departure from the leadership provided by Yasser Arafat. In our hour long meeting with him, he answered every question forthrightly and conveyed a respect for Ariel Sharon and his efforts to achieve peace. At the same time, it is clear that Mr. Abbas was under tremendous pressure from certain elements within the Palestinian community -- especially Hamas -- a group recognized by the United States as a terrorist organization.



Congressman Dan Lungren meets with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to discuss the Middle East peace process and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that Mr. Abbas is attempting a balancing act within his own constituency in hopes to make more secure the leadership apparatus he leads. His hope is that expected economic and social progress in the Gaza Strip will strengthen the hand of his legitimate government and weaken the more radical forces.

In short, I believe that there is reason for hope if his actions match the words he spoke to us.

The trip to visit him in his compound in Ramala was, however, a sobering anecdote to any sense of unbridled hope. We made the 40 minute trip in a caravan of three Suburbans owned by the U.S. Consulate General's office accompanied by armed security. The Suburban was outfitted with bulletproof glass and I surmised other protective armor. The compound was the scene of the siege of Yasser Arafat just two years before.

As a side note, I should mention that all of the political leaders we met within the Israeli government stated it is their opinion that the U.S. actions in Iraq have proven to be helpful to the prospects for peace in the region. They all noted that Quadaffi had taken Libya out of the nuclear arms and terrorism business because of our actions against Iraq. Similarly, Syria had removed most of its presence from Lebanon and allowed that country to take first steps toward self government. At the same time, Egyptians have begun to take first incremental steps towards democratic processes in their own country. We were told none of this would have occurred without our military actions in Iraq.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Dan Lungren', written over a horizontal line.

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